



After life: the paradox of the photographic portrait

James McArdle

1
See P. Enkman and W.V. Freisen, *Unmasking the Face: A Guide to Recognising Emotions From Facial Clues* (New Jersey: Englewood, 1975).

1 Visages

Who really are our gods, our devils? We find ourselves living amongst them, they are 'ordinary' people. The everyday assumes epic significance as the mythological arises from our human experience. As a practising artist I have longed to portray my friends as gods in their glory and my enemies as incarnations of evil. But I must confront the nature of my medium, photography, which is particular, rather than idealising in its representations. I want to make photographs that are both a theatre and a document of the self in which my subjects pose as themselves and are recognised by others, the viewers, *who have never met them*, just as I recognise the personæ of some photographs.

Most photo-portraits concentrate on the face, the instrument of most human expression and communication. However, without a shared context, it is in fact difficult to read all but the most obvious signs on the face. How much can we read there of the personality of another human being which is undoubtedly the most complex entity that we can comprehend? How much can the face tell us? ¹ We try to read the faces of people we meet, but there is always something hidden, 'masked'.

What is the importance of the mask — the face — in the portrait?

Consider St. Veronica. According to legend she was the woman of Jerusalem who handed her head-cloth to Christ on His way to Calvary. He wiped His brow and returned it to her. The image it was seen to bear is supposed to be the likeness of Christ, arguably a kind of photograph, and it was called Vera-Icon (true likeness) and the woman consequently became St. Veronica.

The paradox of the portrait lies in the premise that a 'true

likeness' has some continuous and true connection with the soul and that it is the face which reflects the soul. Without a face — who are we?

There is a 1959 French mystery film *Eyes Without a Face* ² in which the actress performs in a plaster mask. With nothing but the immobile face of a mannequin, she manages to maintain a personality. It is the cinematic and narrative context that provides her with this personality. The father, a murderous plastic surgeon, steals a face for his daughter whose face has been destroyed. But the operation fails and this living mask festers. Like the face of Dorian in Oscar Wilde's *A Portrait of Dorian Gray* the breakdown of this face is seen to be the result of moral wrongdoing and divine vengeance, a violation of Beauty and Goodness. Redon and Wilde embellish, with camp emphasis, the myth of the face as seat of the soul.

Where is the site of the portrait? How can a visual image possibly convey the spiritual dimension of a human life? Can manifestations of the ideal be found in the real, the sacred discovered in the mundane? I argue that it is the environment of the portrait, its *theatre*, rather than the mask, that contains a metaphysical potential.

2 The photographic portrait colonises everyday life

The portrait, once relatively rare and restricted to the wealthy, powerful and famous, has proliferated since the invention of photography to the point where it is ubiquitous. A consequence is that photographs of faces often become part of other photographs. The phenomenon of the picture within a picture emphasises capacity of the space of the photograph *around* the face to convey complex ideas.

In *Nicaragua*, a book about the civil war in Nicaragua by photojournalist Susan Meiselas, it can be argued that none of the images are portraits, but three of her photographs ³ contain portraits *within* them. *Nicaragua's* images at the time were controversial in that they eschewed the 'action' shots of the front line and dealt, in colour, with the people's revolution from their perspective. Text appears separately and the primary form of communication is visual.

Here are photographs that include other photographs within

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Les Yeux sans Visage —
screenplay by Jean Redon
from his novel, directed
by Georges Franju. U.S.
title *The Horror Chamber of
Dr. Faustus*.

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From Susan Meiselas,
*Nicaragua, June 1978–July
1979* (London Writers and
Readers Cooperative,
1981).

4

John Berger, 'The Changing View of Man in the Portrait' in *The Look of Things, Selected Essays and Articles* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 35–41.

5

See Roger Scruton, 'The Aesthetic Understanding', *Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1983), p. 11 and ch. 2.

them. One photograph holds the other, caught by the camera's panoptic vision, in parentheses. This coincidence changes the capacity of both images, and is uniquely photographic.

Consider *Recruits pass by official portrait of Anastasio Somoza Debayle as President and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces*. On its own the internal image, framed within Meiselas photograph presents us with the official General Somoza emblazoned with the symbols of military power. Seated at his desk his image is not that of 'an individual' but a figure of authority. Here is an example of what John Berger would consider to be the predominant function of the portrait in Western art.⁴ The General's name and rank forms the caption of the portrait. Thus the portrait is given a name. A portrait is a form of naming.⁵

This title is contained by the lower edge of Meiselas' frame, thus becoming *its* caption in turn. However the intrusion of the figures of the recruits passing in front breaks up the caption so that all we can read is 'GENERAL DE DIVISI . . . OZA DEBAYLE'. That the General's surname is momentarily obscured by the body of one of the recruits becomes significant. An 'erasure' of a pivotal part of the 'permanent' and monumental image of the General was anticipated by the photographer. Meiselas' 'text' for the official portrait becomes the evenly spaced figures of the recruits which on their own would be meaningless, just men with shaven heads. Seen in this context they appear Lilliputian and the General appears gigantic. His gaze is all-seeing and not-seeing. His hand seems to grasp the shoulder of one of his toy soldiers. These appear to be captive, eyes downcast, heads newly shaved, hands amputated by the frame. The men walk into the gassy gloom of the fluorescent lights which reflect a magenta glare onto the glossy surface of the photo within the photo. The glare becomes a malevolent halo around Somoza's glowering eyes.

Within the context of the book's double page spread the scale of political relationships escalates. On the opposite page across a white void Somoza is brought face to face with a group of boys. They have lit a bonfire on the street and are bellowing defiance at National Guardsmen outside the picture, but in fact look as if they shout directly at Somoza himself. The conflict between the government and the rebels is framed between these images. This is the context of

one type of the portrait where the portrait equates with political power. It codifies a person in relation to other frames of reference and other hierarchies of significance.

Pages 19–20 form a spread where two Sandinista F.S.L.N. flags bracket two images of death. One is of a corpse, the other contains a photograph of someone who had become a corpse by then, when re-photographed in Meiselas' image. This time the 'photo within the photograph' is simply an identification photo of a student, a Sandinista rebel. This is a black and white photograph amidst black and red banners within a colour photograph. Monochrome here has a condensed 'factuality' with connotations of being 'past'. Colour projects and implies an emotional immediacy. Meiselas brings together two different levels of reality. On its own the dead student's face is nothing amongst millions of ID photos, but enlarged and born up by the protesters amongst the banners and placards, it is transfigured. It becomes an icon.

Here is another caption discovered by Meiselas' image. In bold letters it reads F.S.L.N. Flowers below, and a placard which condemns 'the dictator' and 'repression' become captions too. The student's I.D. photograph has become an emblem, and its mute, poignant message is the source of the crowd's vengeful fervour. A portrait can be *more than a name*.

The space around the photograph/placard of the dead student is full of the accidents of instantaneous exposure — grimaces, open mouths, fists in the place of a man's eyes. Sainted, beautifully impassive, the photographed face amplifies the bawling faces. Identity, identification, the photograph and the portrait share restless ground. The ID photograph validates identity. To a degree the replica shares the same identity as the original subject. The extent to which the portrait in the above case is identified with the subject implies that the portrait carries with it far more of the subject than mere surface appearance.

In Nicaragua, identity is dangerous. If you have a face it can be obliterated. Witness the headless corpse on the hill above Managua. A mask is a form of protection. It is a commonplace to say that we all use our face as a mask. In the environment of Nicaragua a mask was essential for political protection. The cover of the book shows us faces masked under bandannas and the cover page depicts a

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See Christian Metz,
Photography and Fetish,
Vol. 34 (U.S.A.: Fall,
October, 1985).

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Jo Spence and Patricia
Holland, ed., *Family Snaps:
the Meanings of Domestic
Photography* (London:
Virago, 1991).

traditional Indian dance mask from the town of Monimbo, adopted by the rebels during the fight against the Government forces to conceal identity.

Finally, the emphatic vindication of the people's struggle comes. *Body of National Guardsman killed during the taking of Jinotepe, being burned with the official state portrait of President Somoza* is a manifestation of the magical properties of the portrait image. Somoza escaped to Miami. The General's *image* is burnt in effigy, the burning body of the Guardsman kindles it. The two are conflated in conflagration. This is a primitive revenge, a 'sympathetic magic' where the image is seen as a replica, a fetish, like the sorcerer's doll.

And yet, the General, not the person, *is* dead, just as photography itself is a form of death, inasmuch as it resembles what is gone, like a corpse. ⁶ Against this 'death effect' lives the poignant hope of portrait photography.

Susan Meiselas is not a portrait photographer, but her book is fervently subjective. It is a lesson in the way the photographic portrait colonises life, how life, consciousness, in turn infiltrates the image. Contextualisation allows the world and the image to flow together.

3 Apparitions

We flow through time and are not frozen as a photograph is frozen. A river is an archetypal analogy for life. If Narcissus were to look at his image, not in a river, but in a photograph, he might not find any representation of this process of dynamic change that is himself. The mirror changes with us, the photograph does not. We inhabit a space, our place, not the flat two-dimensional surface we see on photographs.

It has been said that it is the task of the portraitist to represent a whole life-story at one moment of that life by means of condensation.

When the image is made in a ritualistic way, as snapshots are, the result is predictable, pre-ordained by established concepts of the family and its roles and the well established conventions of family snaps. ⁷ In fact they deal in myths, not real lives. But they always show more than intended, and when we look at them from the future we can see they are prophecies.

What you might see about to happen in my photographs too, has happened. They often look like family photographs. Marriages have failed, children been born. I can know this because I know the people. But the photograph comes before, it is 'Before', and because the subjects are anonymous the viewer cannot know what comes after any more than I can tell you what they will do tomorrow. In this way, what starts as a document ends looking as much like fiction as a predictive biography might, if there is such a thing.

The people in front of the camera and those inside the camera are not replicas of each other. Those outside are people, those inside are ghosts. Obvious, but so often confused. To make images that are as telling as portraits are supposed to be, is only possible if the photographer is aware of this distinction and aware that the ghost in the camera *poses* as the person. This becomes obvious when you look at the ground glass at an image inverted and reversed. I am using a large format camera, a Sinar, that is actually intended for studio work. Instead of the traditional dark cloth I strap onto my head a close-fitting mask attached to the ground glass screen via bellows. Physically I am *in* the camera. One looks *at* the subject *as an image*, not framing it as through a viewfinder. After some moments of concentration the inverted image rights itself but it is always laterally reversed, as in a mirror. I get out of my camera and stand beside it to expose the film — you cannot view the ground glass at this point because the film is put in its place — and I try to see as the camera sees. Waiting tensely, I am embarrassed, nervous and trying to vanish so as not to affect what goes on between my 'sitters'. It's the almost unbearable tension one feels watching a good mystery film. What is going to happen, can I predict, am I wrong, have I seen the clues? The only way to cut the tension is to leave the cinema or endure till the end.

I am moved to make portraits of the people I know. I cannot make these people up — they must exist in order to for me to photograph them. The faces they present to me, to others, to the camera, conceal and reveal themselves, their selves. In order to portray them I must know them, otherwise all I, or they, can show you is a hollow 'likeness'. Between the known face and what it reveals, and the possibility of knowing someone only from their face in a photograph. Should faces, and photographs that contain only

faces be trusted?

A life-story, portrayal, is a form of detection, like the mystery film, and linked to death. The portrait photograph is like the corpse. How can this be when it is so easy to believe in the life in the photo? But the act of portrayal through photography is close to death in that it is like a eulogy that is at the same time a conversation. People in portraits are speaking to us, but at the same time they are being represented. The representation can be honest or dishonest, portrayal or betrayal — it is an exchange or a promise or a contract. In a photograph the 'moral dimension' becomes a visual exchange using as currency all the metaphor that can be assembled in the image.

In photography the image can contain a great deal more than just the face — the 'likeness' — there is an embarrassing wealth of space in a photograph with which to do this and the medium will almost automatically create a likeness of everything in that space. Attempts are made to cover that 'everything' with background paper as in Richard Avedon's fashion shots and portraits, or hide it in darkness, or move in so close that the 'everything' is cropped away, or to import metaphors (objects, costumes, colours, historical or political references etc.) into the orbit of the studio photograph as Clegg and Gutmann⁸ or Farrell and Parkin do.

Conversely, retaining the 'everything' provides for the possibility of the literal becoming metaphoric, that the ideal might be found in the real, the sacred in the mundane.

We do not exist in isolation, yet so many photographs, supposed to be portraits, show us alone. I photograph in an environment full of found topographical detail. In planning and arranging one of these photographs, my main concern is searching out the right place, of visualising the couples or friends or families together there. Views from different positions, as from among the human relationships to be portrayed, are unique sights. Through their relationships the people will focus each other and the place. Just as the couple, about to separate, and their son do in 'Arrangement'. The camera is placed in relation to the focal point they create. Clues, names for emotions, interactions, rapports, intimacies, histories, alliances or betrayals are somewhere in this space. They may take the form of a balancing rock, a dead dog, a kind of light,

or a shadow that looks like a wing. Their discovery is an intuitive one for myself in producing the image, as much as for the viewer. In this way, in a still photograph which in itself has no beginning or end, mystery and discovery co-exist, overlap and fold out.

Focus, the device I use, becomes a visual meta-language, a voice-over, an image of and about the image, indicating the signs of detection.⁹ In the ground glass, with the aperture wide open, focus seems to be a tangible substance that can be physically moulded by movements of the camera. A plane of focus is a fourth dimension, an overlay that makes space tangible or creates voids, that coalesces the chaos of time and space to produce meaning.

What is known and what is unknown are here together.

You see these apparitions before you. These are relationships that I know, that I love and try to comprehend. Here in these photographs they are anonymous but not without naming. If they are not themselves, then who else are they?

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For critical responses see Glenda Thompson, 'Mystery Leads to Paris', *The Bulletin* (Australia: November 6th 1990), pp. 94–98.

Greg Neville, 'A World of Fragments and Isolated Parts', *The Age*, Thursday 9th August 1990.

Michelle Swanborough, *Positive/Negative* — James McArdle and Julie Millowick, catalogue of survey exhibition Bendigo Art Gallery, 2nd May–2nd June 1991 (Bendigo: Bendigo Art Gallery 1991).